

KNOWLEDGE and skill have traditionally been the mainstays of American education. But in the long term, education must aim for active use of knowledge and skill.

Students garner knowledge and skill in schools so they can put them to work in professional and lay roles that require appreciation, understanding, and judgment. Yet, rote knowledge generally defies active use, and routine skills often serve poorly because students do not understand when to use them. In short, we must teach for understanding in order to realize the long-term payoffs of education.

Understanding a topic of study is being able to perform in a variety of thought-demanding ways with the topic—to explain, muster evidence, find examples, generalize, apply concepts, analogize, represent in a new way, etc. These performances concerning the topic show one's understanding and, at the same time, advance it by encompassing new situations. We call these "understanding performances" or "performances of understanding."

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Do Students Understand Understanding?

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*From An Apple for Education:
Teaching and Learning
for Understanding*

JANUARY 1994